

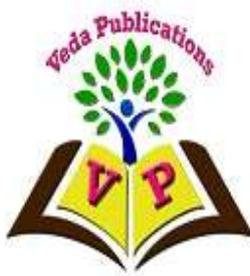


THE PARADOX OF TRANSLATION AND CULTURE IN MAHESHWETA DEVI'S "AAJIR."

Dr.A. Linda Primlyn

(Associate Professor of English, Scott Christian College, Nagercoil 629003.)

ABSTRACT



In this paper an attempt has been made to outline the problems faced by translators in general and the difficulties involved in the process of Translation. The paper also discusses the exact flavor that accounts for the original cultural essence in Translation. The selected play "Aajir" by Maheshweta Devi is taken up for discussion, to contextualize and highlight not just the political and social problems, but also the political underpinnings that govern and shape Bengali literary taste. In a country like India-- semi-colonial, semi-feudal congenitally attuned to foreign exploitation-- abounding with problems and injustices, races and rituals, writers seem to find nothing new other than the experience of the land and its people.

Viewing such extreme indifference Maheshweta Devi writes "I desire a transformation of the present social system. I do not believe in narrow party politics" (Introduction viii). So her writings are about the socially and politically exploited humans which raise awareness in the society.

Keywords: Folklore, Mythology, Legends, Reflection of the Culture.

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"Aajir" is the story of a slave held by a bond signed by an ancestor—slavery that denies him the right to love, marry and live a life of dignity. Later it is discovered that the bond has turned to be invalid much earlier, and it is found out very late. People in India, mostly, are denied their legal right, their legitimate wages and hence they have to struggle even to obtain the water, the seeds and the fertilizers they need for their fields. They live in poverty and hunger. Maheshweta Devi grieves, "The exploitation of the starving peasants continues unabated . . . Rural India has the appearance of an enormous graveyard" (viii). The economic gain that the country has achieved since Independence is not beneficial to the middle class, the workers and the agricultural labourers. The rich have become richer and the richer has come into lifeblood. The middle class has become poorer and the lower middle class is almost extinct. While nobody heeds to their claim for the right to survive, the employee of the opulent middle class and the idle rich weave egocentric creativity in the name of literature.

At this situation, Maheshweta Devi's grief is reflected in the way of writing. The problems of Translation are manifold but two major problems that baffle the translators are linguistic and cultural. The force of the source text "Aajir" in Bengali by Maheshweta Devi does communicate to a considerable extent in this Translation by Samik Bandyopadhyay. What one misses is the exact flavor that accounts for the original cultural essence. It is an extremely difficult task to do justice to the text's Translation into another Indian language. Any translator of Maheshweta Devi's drama sets out with a decided handicap, that of the difficulty of translating the speech rhythms of the native dialect that she imitates so ably, as well as marking its departure from the colloquial Bengali she uses. Nida summarises his Translation methodology as follows: "It is both scientifically and practically more efficient to reduce the source text to its structurally simplest and most semantically evident kernels" (Nida 68).

The problem begins with the title of the Translated work. Translating "Aajir" into English poses a challenge. The term "Aajir" is a disrespectful form used either to address another human who is of a higher status and importance or to a layman.

Again, "Aajir" is a word that would more or less be understood by mere Indian readers. Hence translating a word seems to be acceptable. However, the fact that it may mean little to a non Indian reader does make such translatorial decisions uncomfortable.

There should be a compromise between the original author and the Translator. Otherwise the translated work loses its flavor. Therefore Benjamin Jovet observes: "All Translation is a compromise, the effort to be literal and the effort to be idiomatic" (ST 13). A good translator should involve not only his mind but also his heart. He is supposed to be fluent in the languages he is involved in. He must be familiar with the structure of the other languages and its linguistic diversity. He should understand a sentence as a unit of thought, and in accordance with the system of his language, that thought must be reworded. Literary translation is still considered secondary activity, mechanical rather than creative. Translation theory is central to anyone interpreting literature. J.C Catford, in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* defines Translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language" (20). Since Translation deals with relation between languages, he considers Translation as a branch of comparative linguistics.

A few other tricky problems during Translation are the use of difficult words. In the story words such as "dhol, Agape Chadak, Gilda Gijang Purulia Bankua, Duma, gaamchha and names like Punnashashi, Raavan Shunri, Golak Kura, Gairabi Dasi, Chetan Kura, Maatang, Bechan and Paatan" do not give any meaning or sense to the readers of other natives. In fact, the author's colloquial Bengali mirrors the difficult regional dialect just as much as the spoken dialect metamorphosing into a more accessible comprehensible written language, both at the same time.

Next difficulty is that Translation can be an interchanging process. In other words, Translation of a work into another or Translation of a text from old language into a new language can be desirably done. When one translates the literature of ancient times to modernize it in the same language, he is bound to face numerous hurdles regarding language and



theme. Since language changes both horizontally and vertically, the Translator cannot render it faithfully. Barbara Johnson argues "In the process of Translation from one language to another, the scene of linguistic castration—which is nothing other than a scene of impossible but unavoidable Translation and normally takes place out of sight—is played on centre stage" (144).

Hence the problem of Translation is greatly enhanced by linguistic indeterminacy which is the result of perpetual change, i.e., the uncertainty of knowing the meaning of the "text" accurately. In literary Translation the "text" is vital, for it is the "text" that has to be rendered in another language. The indeterminacy of the text is a crucial concept in contemporary literary criticism. Ronald Barthes rightly observes "as a limiting case, an ideal text that is infinitely plural and contrasts it with the classical text, which is characterized by a limited or parsimonious plurality of sense (235).

The other problems a translator faces arise while rendering a text from the Source Language to the Target Language. His task is more difficult than a creative writer for the latter thinks and writes in one language while the former has to make a tight-rope walking between two languages. Ages ago Cicero summed up the Translator's dilemma in the following words: "If I tender word for word, the result will sound uncouth and if compelled by necessity I alter anything in the order or wording. I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator" (75 43).

Again the Translator involves not only in the transferences of meaning but a host of associations charged with the meaning which need to be translated from the Source Language Text into the Target Language Text. Since the basic loss of meaning is once a continuum between under translation and over translation, it is imperative on the readers' part to divide literary translation genre wise.

The greatest problem is when translating a text (i.e., a poem) from a distant past and it is not that the poet and his contemporaries are dead but "the significance of the poem in its context is dead" (Mc Guire 83). It is often argued that Translation is not interpretation. The job of the translator is to reproduce what the author says and not what he means. So Translation of poetry is the most difficult

mode of Translation. This is because it abounds in figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, irony, paradox, etc. and unprecedented phonological, syntactic and semantic patterns such as rhyming alliteration, versification, morphological parallelism, syntactic parallelism and above all syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between words. The translator of poetry should remember that he is to 'translate' a piece of poetry, and not to 're-write' or 'produce an interpretation' of it. To execute this Maheshweta Devi draws on words from several sources simultaneously, and breaks into almost lyrical evocations to celebrate the dramatic high points, the lyrical stretches borne upon a pattern of reiterations and repetitions.

The second major issue is cultural. Culture and cultural words create a good deal of problems when it comes up for Translation. Since the target language English does not have any such equivalent signification, the moment the source language is rendered in it, the effect of the original language is nullified and flattened. There is no choice but to use Standard English, and hope to provide compensation by other means of usage. The English Translation, thus, tends to delete from the text its original political intent, and fails to communicate the many political and cultural nuances that invest the original with dynamic energy and potency.

In present day India, the crucial and responsible activity of Translation negotiate between a bewildering heterogeneity of cultural and sub cultural expressions of an exceedingly plural society. It should respect the culture's right to self-expression, which cannot happen if one's objective is reduced to producing an eminently readable Translation. The play "Aajir" is inscribed with specific worldviews and societal attitudes. These should not be too smoothly made to fit into the worldviews and attitudes built indiscernibly into the target language. The emphasis today should be on meeting the signification of source text on its own terms, rather than translating purely on the terms of the target language.

Socio-cultural matrix plays a vital role in checking the nuances of the words in both languages—Source Language and Target Language. Language is largely culture-oriented and therefore,



translators face the problem of translating certain culture-based words into another language with a different cultural colloquial expressions, culture-words, slangs, proverbs which are difficult to translate, for there is no one to one correspondence between one culture and another or one language and another. Certain food items of India and words of common use in everyday conversation based on culture cannot be translated accurately into a foreign language. Cultural words create problems, as the impact of them gets lost in the process of Translation.

The two classes of characters that have dominated in the play is women bearing the brunt of social and political oppression, enduring and resisting with indomitable will and the next is the sensitive individual, initially political, but with the strongest of ties binding her to a community, growing to the role of a leader, as she absorbs into her felt, personal awareness, the huge impersonal dehumanizing experience of exploitation that her community endures. Usually her women are too earthy and emotionally charged to bear overtones of any mystical-mythical or archetypal women. They are invariably located within a network of relationships defining their personalities into absolute clarity.

Here the reader finds how the author records, reviews and empathizes with the sufferers especially with the major characters who are not able to explicate their sufferings before others. In tracing the transformation of the slave to a free man, Maheshweta Devi comments darkly on the powers of a society which can combine forces to effect nearly the impossible. "An aajir, you! An aajir, you!/ No escape for you!/ No life for you! No world for you" (50). In the story's ironic ending, The Mistress too sacrifices her life to let known her so far hidden miserable existence. A once blameless life has been lost. She has crafted her own final sacrifice to bring out a learning experience for every woman who is being stamped on by the male. When the community condemns Paatan as a "slave," "The aajir's on the run. There the aajir runs. Catch him, Ho-o-o-i. . ." (45), it is proved that it condemns its own liberty and thereby compels a person to live in constant fear of the evil power of aristocracy.

Hence it is revealed that due to Translation, people from other languages be able to come closer with the description of the physical conditions and experiences, and thereby are woken up with social conscience. The problem becomes all the more obvious in technical and semi-technical writings. At this juncture, as an angry, luminous, burning and passionate woman, Maheshweta Devi is directed against the system that has failed to liberate her people from these horrible constraints, and she feels that this is the only source of inspiration for her writing. It is pointed out that traditional constraints bind an individual in India long after his legal authority has given way. Exploitation in India operates beyond the law. Legal reforms rarely affect the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy of the exploited. Maheshweta Devi says, "I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation" (*Translating Caste* 141).

Apart from this, Maheshweta Devi touches upon the larger space of the social forces that separate a husband and a wife in a male dominated system. In addition to slaves and slave owners the mental suffering of the protagonist The Mistress, due to male chauvinism, in an aristocratic family is highlighted. Certainly the story is a sad commentary on what an aristocratic society does to its women and to lower castes with its stress and strain. This chastening tale, realistically accounts of the horror of the perfectly regular existence, shattered at the whim of the illiterate woman and the slave Paatan who join hand in hand in the midst of their inward trials and tribulations, though they are outwardly unfit to join in the face of the society. The woman's inner conflicts cannot be explicated and not understood even by the husband who gets himself with an illicit woman. The slave too is caught in the strange paradox of patriarchy and the power of the single, helpless aristocratic woman. However helpless she is, aristocracy is conferred on her and that which she very much desires to reject, for it marginalises her. Here the reader finds pleasure in destroying the helpless oppressed people's happiness.

Maheshweta Devi's progressive plays of post-Independence India have gone a long way in shaping modern Bengali theatre. She deals with



varied themes such as passage of time, mortality, cultural identity, sexuality, religious tension, gender issues, bondage and alienation, which are the classic concerns of all great works of literature. The subjects of her stories have become the subject of her life, and also from the lives and struggles of the tribal and under-privileged communities settled in the border regions of the three neighbouring states -- West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The tones of oral narratives in the 'impure' idiom of everyday speech are captured by her. The historical documents delve into archival records, and then travel through the desert villages and plateau collecting with painstaking care scraps of legends and folk ballads.

A slightly different form is chosen in "Aajir" with songs and rituals and evocations providing a historical field of the past and the present for the action. As Maheshweta Devi writes in her Preface to a recent collection of her stories: "It is my conviction that a storywriter should be motivated by a sense of history that would help her readers to understand their own times" (). She got the idea for "Aajir" from a slave bond executed by a slave who sold himself into slavery. Literature should be studied in its historical setting. One fails to evaluate a writer if the writer's setting in time and history is not taken into account. Andre Lefevere in *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* argues "the translator not only has to be fluent in the language, must also grasp the time, place, and tradition of the source text, rendering all elements in the target cultural language, time place and tradition" (99). In an Interview in April 1983, she acknowledges "once I became a professional writer, I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history. The socio-economic history of human development has always fascinated me" (Introduction vii).

The slave character Paatan goes to the past and acts the part of his ancestor Golak who has sold himself and his wife to perpetual slavery for generations. Paatan's continued acceptance of suffering for his future is due to his forefather's sins, which goes, "the two of us. . . and on our descendants at or for the price of ours for which we have voluntarily sold ourselves to you in consideration of your maintaining us and working for you" (MD 37). The device itself becomes a metaphor

for the continuities in the process of exploitation. As the character in the present becomes a character in the past, there is a natural lift in the style, an element of the ceremonial often verging on the ritual, to give the event a metaphoric charge.

In translating and dramatizing "Aajir," the stage offers various possibilities to convey the sense of the uniqueness of Maheshweta Devi's subject and milieu. The Mistress manages quite confidently to depart from the original narrative sequence of the story, perhaps taking liberties for drama's sake: the poverty of the villagers; the Mistress' sadness towards marrying a "bloody eunuch" (39); falling in love with a young "slave," and finally "slave" killing the Mistress of the house.

Hence it is presumed, of course, that the condition of slaves and slave owners is highlighted for the effect of improvement. The final sacrifice of Paatan the slave and the aristocratic Mistress will spread into a larger community and that will help to lessen their load of suffering. In order not to forget completely their reckless sacrifice, they would continue to pay for it by a sustained fear for the lives of their children. The Mistress's heroic death shows her evil selfish nature on one side but on the other she has taken a drastic step to set the slave free by giving awareness to other slaves. Ironically, she has no intention of haunting him in life but returned to haunt him in earth.

Maheshweta Devi does not usually write about the lives of those who read her but about those who are lesser known. This activist writer's particular social agenda is to make their miserable lives known. The power of her plots which she draws from her "grassroots dedication to the deprived," (Anand Lal 6) is the impact of her fiction. Hence it is proved that Translation is not only an issue of communicating certain narratives across languages or across cultures but it is a social institution, an assortment of cultural discourses which might well extend its reach to readers even outside academia as well.

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